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Sustainable consumption à la française? Conventional, innovative, and alternative approaches to sustainability and consumption in France

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Consumption has again become the object of critical political attention in France over the last few years. Despite obvious links with the global project to promote “sustainable consumption,” this renewal of interest has had little connection with Agenda 21. Among the factors responsible for this situation, the poor integration of environmental issues in French political culture seems to be of primary importance. While the country has made some recent progress, historical analyses highlight the fragmented style of environmental management in France. These circumstances, in turn, have contributed to the slow uptake of “sustainable development” and have been a major impediment in the implementation of successful eco-consumption policies. However, if the ultimate goal of “sustainable consumption” is to transcend contemporary ways of acquiring goods and to move toward a reassessment of the values underlying them, then several developments in France become directly relevant. Indeed, if the country does not qualify as a leader in conventional eco-consumption policies, it has begun to evince self-reflexivity regarding some basic consumption practices. This article considers three especially notable developments: (1) the implementation of innovative employment policies such as the 35-hour work week; (2) the revival of the country's anti-consumerism movement; and (3) the adoption of confrontational positions on culture and agriculture during international trade negotiations. Taken in the round, these trends suggest the emergence of a nationwide exercise in “discriminating consumerism” and a move away from an unquestioned materialism.

KEYWORDS: sustainable consumption, politics, economic policy, environmental aspects, green revolution, cultural values, international agreements, socio-political aspects, environmental management

Introduction

Not since 1968 has France witnessed such fierce debate about the role of consumption as it has in recent years. As was the case nearly four decades ago, current concerns indicate a range of palpable anxieties regarding the rapid transformation of vast swaths of the cultural and socio-political map that shape environmental debates. However, in contrast to the 1960s, the themes have shifted from a traditional emphasis on right-versus-left politics to a focus on issues more readily associated with routine practices. It is this new, essentially cultural, *problématique* that policymakers have tentatively articulated through the

elusive notion of “quality of life.” In its broadest sense, this concept accommodates issues as diverse as health, physical environment, and economic status, as well as the ontological security conferred by one's own cultural milieu.

Nonetheless, this unease is most visible in the political arena. Recently in France, as in other affluent countries, a significant segment of the public has passively supported, or even actively adopted, anti-establishment positions and begun to use a range of discursive channels previously confined to the most radical elements of anti-capitalism. For example, it is now common to see the mainstream media linking food-safety issues—such as those surrounding genetically-modified foods and mad-cow

disease—with wider denunciations of the structure and ethics of the global free-market system that is itself portrayed as a playground for transnational corporations (e.g., Goodman and Watts, 1997). Unambiguously identified as the ultimate recipient of power, multinational firms frequently stand accused of using their dominance to safeguard their interests in complicity with the most powerful governments, and with scant regard to environmental threats (climate change), geo-political crises (debt crisis in developing countries), or social issues (loss of cultural identity). There is little doubt that this discursive assemblage constitutes a de facto questioning of some of the central features of contemporary production and consumption (Crace, 2000).

What distinguishes France is the manner in which this protest movement has been assimilated into the country's political culture. In addition to the spectacular rise in the popularity of personalities such as José Bové, and the growing support for anti-globalization groups (at a time when more traditional forms of political activity are being increasingly discarded), the French have voiced their dissent en masse via opinion polls, demonstrations, and electoral processes.¹ The first round of the 2002 presidential election crystallized some of these underlying trends by confirming record support for candidates opposed to global economic liberalism.² This radicalization is perhaps all the more significant in the French context where, by European standards, mainstream politicians of all stripes already tend to condemn the basic tenets of what they pejoratively refer to as “Anglo-Saxon ultra-liberalism.”³

However, if the denunciation of the current economic order has found solid backing in contemporary French politics at both institutional and grassroots levels, the environment has surely not been the “ideological engine” of this renewed mobilization. International policy documents such as Agenda 21 have had seemingly few repercussions on the national political debate, despite their

obvious links with the issues at stake. Even the “sustainability themes” directly challenging the most blatantly harmful socio-economic mechanisms have not found significant resonance. The fourth chapter of Agenda 21, which stresses the destructiveness of current Western consumption patterns, is a case in point. If, alongside subsequent international policy statements, this document has formally made “sustainable consumption” a legitimate and integrative policy domain (and triggered the creation of several notable research and policy programs), few French policymakers seem currently responsive to these developments.

In itself, this apparent lack of interest in such radical ideas—somewhat paradoxical from a nation often considered to be the *avant-garde* of political protest and the champion of interventionism—calls for an analysis of the causes of this relative neglect, as well as the conditions required for this new set of policy tools to receive a more heartfelt endorsement at the national level. The objective here is to investigate these questions using a theoretical framework in line with current research on sustainable consumption and political culture. This discussion contends that, to assess the political culture's readiness to accommodate the principles underpinning “sustainable consumption,” one has to look beyond the realm of national green policies and politics and to encompass the socio-cultural determinants of consumption habits. In other words, the analytic context must include contributions from all potential actors interested in revising the values behind, and the level of, current consumption patterns (Westra and Werhane, 1998; Cohen and Murphy, 2001). As a result, this treatment employs a definition of “sustainable consumption policy” that includes, in addition to the four main conventional policy tools (green procurement, eco-taxation, eco-labelling and eco-campaigning), the whole array of social developments (i.e. national and local policies, ideas, research programs, discourses, and initiatives) that relate directly to the definition of new consumption practices. These routines may entail bone fide changes in the actual structure of consumption, as well as renewed self-reflexivity towards consumerist habits.

The discussion that follows has a three-step format. After a preliminary overview of the key characteristics of the French polity in relation to the environment and sustainable development, the country's most recent achievements in conventional “green consumerism” policies are reviewed and assessed. The next section investigates a sample of three socio-political phenomena that relate directly to the (re)shaping of present-day French consumerism. First, it examines the consequences of the new work-sharing policy (the 35-hour week) on national. Second, it describes the relationship of the recent revival of anti-consumerism in French politics to the project of sustainable consumption. Finally, this section explores the relevance of a quintessential expression of the national political culture with regard to consumption—namely, the tendency of French policymakers to use a well-articulated range of discursive resources about “culture” and “national identity” to challenge the hegemonic position of certain actors, mechanisms, or commodities that comprise the global market. The conclusion assesses the

¹ José Bové is the leader of an organization of small farmers, *Confédération Paysanne*. He has been at the forefront of international anti-globalization protests and has been a prominent figure in domestic French politics since 1999.

² The candidates proposing such a radical proposition received in total more than 30 percent of the votes. Far right parties had 19 percent and Trotskyite candidates received in excess of 10 percent. Part of this success is attributable to allegations that the Communist candidate—who received just over 3 percent—was perceived as too willing to compromise with economic liberalism. In addition, other small mainstream candidates claiming a hard line on globalization collected another 10 percent of the votes, a result that suggests misgivings about further integration into the global capitalist system on the part of virtually all French political parties. Moreover, this outcome accounted for almost half of the votes cast during a period of record economic prosperity and decreasing unemployment (*Le Monde*, 2002a).

³ Anchored in a strong tradition of state interventionism, the French aversion to ultra-liberalism is illustrated by the fact that only one minor political party (*Démocratie Libérale* that typically receives less than two percent of the vote) openly employs the rhetoric common to Conservatives in Britain and Republicans in the United States. Significantly, during the 1980s, when these parties were in power abroad, France chose the opposite direction and elected a socialist-communist coalition that implemented an active nationalization policy. To some extent, this antagonism may explain why particular political dispositions—as displayed, for example, during mass demonstrations in support of public services—are often associated with an only partially concealed anti-Anglo-Saxon rhetoric.

capacity of French political culture to accommodate the principles of sustainable consumption.

French Political Culture and the Environment: An Overview

Understanding the intricate combination of characteristics usually associated with French political culture is no simple matter. Coming to terms with how the “cultural filter” has shaped the environmental question in French society seems even more difficult, and the sheer size of the task limits one to broad generalizations and caricatured statements. With this in mind, this first section clarifies how, as Almond (1956) terms it, “the patterns of orientation to political action” have been fashioned and expressed in France with regard to environmental issues over the past thirty years or so.

Environment and the “National Character”

A first logical step in the search for a national disposition toward the environment is, perhaps, to determine what has been emblematic of the French environmental attitude. However, a cursory browse through the literature sweeps away any hope of identifying a consistent trend. As studies have repeatedly shown, no clear behavioral pattern emerges at a national level vis-à-vis the environment, or rather, there seems to be nothing quite distinctive about the French disposition. If observers have noted a slow rise in concern over the past two decades, this growing support has varied widely according to economic circumstances or ecological incident, as it has for most similar nations (Alphandéry et al., 1991; Dobré, 1995). The electoral fortunes of *Les Verts* and the other green parties have oscillated roughly between 3 to 15 percent over the last fifteen years, depending on the type and time of elections. Moreover, no clear pattern seems to invalidate the hypothesis that their recent participation in the government was merely the result of a change in political strategy (Villalba, 1996; Abélès, 1997). From a more analytical perspective, it is possible to identify two basic reasons for what Szarka (2002) calls the “lumpiness and diffusion” of the French public’s concern for the environment. The first is geographic. France is still a territory with a comparatively low population density, composed principally of small villages and towns dispersed over more than a 500,000 square kilometers of biodiversity-rich land.⁴ In such a context, French sensibilities have scarcely been captured by the (essentially urban) conservationist rhetoric of an endangered nature to be preserved at all cost. Instead, it is the rising “desertification” of the countryside—and therefore the notions of *ruralité* and *aménagement* (rural life and planning)—that have caught the attention of a public renowned for its tenacious rural view of self.⁵

⁴ France still has more than 36,000 *communes* (municipalities), a number that is greater than all other European countries combined. In addition, while France represents about 12 percent of overall European territory, it sustains more than 40 percent of the continent’s flora species (IFEN, 1994).

⁵ The countryside is maintained in the French collective imagination as the fragile holder of many traditional values and *savoir-faire*. This construction

The second major factor accounting for the aforementioned “lumpiness” is culture. Divided as it originally was between Saxon, Latin, and Celtic spheres of influence (to name only the main ones), France has often defied the categorizations commonly used in comparative studies of environmental attitudes and public policies based on national explanatory frameworks (e.g., Sbragia, 1996; Andersen and Liefferink, 1997). In the “leader-laggard” or “push-pull” types of explanations (where southern European countries are more often than not following their northern counterparts on the path towards ecological modernization), France has been consistently rated “neutral” or “average.” These evaluations make ambiguous the country’s politico-cultural membership on environmental issues (Sbragia, 1996; Szarka, 2002).

Taken too literally, all this could indicate the absence of a distinguishable French national “orientation” towards the environment. Indeed, as Cohen (2000) explains in his study of attitudes toward ecological modernization in the Netherlands, “there are credible reasons to suspect that the concept of national character is more robust for small, relatively homogeneous countries.” In France, this is clearly not the case. However, if a French specificity seems difficult to establish from a sociological perspective, there is no doubt that the environment has infiltrated the country’s political history and administrative arrangements through explicit channels. The discussion now turns to an overview of the latter’s influence on the national responsiveness to environmental issues.

Governance and the Environment

In France, the government’s influence on public matters is all the more important if one considers the omnipotence of the state. Established under Louis XIV’s prime minister, Colbert, the notoriously strong forms of centralism and interventionism that emerged in France in the 17th century were subsequently toughened. This centralization was intensified during the revolutionary wars that secured the survival of a republic that had been threatened by an alliance of hostile monarchies from the very moment it was born. These seminal events, in turn, were exacerbated by the strong faith in science, the hubristic attitude toward nature, and the passionately secular outlook that was prevalent among the Revolution’s philosophers (Merchant 1992).⁶ The eventual result was a national political culture—namely French republicanism—characterized by dependence on a powerful and centralized

is captured in French by the term *terroir*, a notion that encompasses both the cultural and natural dimensions of a place, and this expression is used extensively to describe the production processes and products of particular rural localities. More generally, the tendency to amalgamate national values, countryside, and *ruralité* has been the basis for the strong public support traditionally extended to farmers and the favorable treatment that they have consistently received from successive governments.

⁶ This Enlightenment inheritance still exists today in a clear tendency among French thinkers to prioritize the “society-culture” perspective over the more Germanic “nature-community” tradition (e.g., Larrère, 1997; Blühdorn, 1997). Influenced by classical philosophers such as Descartes, Rousseau, Pascal, and Montesquieu, the French school of social science illustrates this inclination through the works of figures such as Durkheim, Comte, Bourdieu, Baudrillard, Sartre, De Beauvoir, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Touraine. The nature-community perspective has, in turn, received less attention, and even the works of Illich, Gortz, Morin, Serres, and Guattari do not constitute a school of French environmental philosophy.

state that controls a series of technical bodies reliant upon “scientific” methods for the administration of public affairs.

In addition to influencing the role of science and the status of the environment throughout France’s history, these developments had a huge impact on the political landscape. Commenting on the influence of the revolutionary struggles, Prendiville (1994) writes that the defense of the republic “gave rise to the first national educational system designed to raise patriotic citizens ready to defend the Nation and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights...[which] had the most important effect in totally identifying the individual with the newly-born State.” Moreover, “this intimate, and at times ambiguous, relationship of the citizen to the State, is at the heart of French political culture and has shaped social and political action ever since.”

Along similar lines, many analysts have shown that the profound amalgam in French polity between “nation” and “state”—and the exclusive power of the latter on anything public (*l'intérêt général*)—has strongly molded the structure of the civil society and the relational patterns of its members (e.g., Gaffney, 1991; Prendiville, 1994; Szarka, 1999). Of all the consequences that have been suggested, two are of particular interest here. First, a particularly close state-citizen link emerged, and subsequently developed into a political mode in which citizens make direct—and often violent—demands on the state that circumvent intermediary bodies, such as trade unions or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Prendiville 1994; Rucht 1989). Second, the state apparatus has used its status of “exclusive representative of the public interest” to multiply its influence, especially in terms of vigorous social interventionism. An outcome of this process is that a cumbersome and somewhat corporatist administration has developed horizontally, vertically, and territorially to maintain coherent and effective public services—for example, the array of nationalized companies that includes *Électricité de France (EDF)* (energy), *Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français (SNCF)* (railways), or *La Poste* (post office).

Such a setting established the environment as a new “public” issue shortly after 1968, and subsequently grafted it onto arguably the most complex administrative system in Europe. Although the new “environmentalism” articulated by the 1968 revolution called primarily for a holistic “political-ecology” approach (including a questioning of productionism and consumerism—Ilich 1971; Gorz 1978), the environment was administered throughout the 1970s and 1980s as an extremely segmented field of technical intervention. The different elements (i.e., air, water, and soil) were the objects of distinct command-and-control policies implemented by numerous usually understaffed administrative agencies under the partial control of a remarkably weak environmental ministry.⁷ Furthermore, no environmental NGOs established a durable influence within the high spheres of French politics, a situation that has remained changed little. After losing the

anti-nuclear battle, and failing to reunite around a common cause in a context where severe economic crises reduced environmental sympathy, most of these “associations” experienced stagnant membership and credibility, and the lobbying “ring” was left to other, more powerful interests.⁸ Apart from the occasional post-election reorganization, there were no major changes in policy style until the 1990s, when the rapid evolution of European legislation and the advent of sustainable development exposed the system’s obsolescence and prompted the first steps towards its renovation.

Europe and Rio: The Beginning of an Integrated Approach?

The first exogenous influence on French environmental governance, the development of European law, has been influential primarily in terms of policy style. Indeed, European directives have been instrumental in upgrading national standards, and this growing body of regulation has also meant more political credibility for the Environment Ministry and the overhaul of its communication style and procedures (e.g., Larrue and Prud’homme, 1993). However, while this outside pressure facilitated the implementation of the first integrative environmental reforms in the beginning of the 1990s, the aftermath of the 1992 Earth Summit did not, curiously enough, boost by the emergence of sustainable development policy.

For many years, the only tangible French response to this new global challenge was nothing more than the creation of yet another assemblage of inter-institutional consultative bodies, a situation Szarka (2002) refers to as the “not-invented here syndrome.” This phrasing essentially means that, while the concept was gaining momentum in other parts of the world, in France it was going through a lengthy process of semantic clarification and content explanation (see also *CFDD* 1996).⁹ Once this process had run its course, the first major laws concerning *le développement durable* were passed, first through the 1995 *Loi Barnier* (establishing the integrative/transversal principle of sustainable development) and later with Environment Minister Dominique Voynet’s “LOADDT” that applied these principles to regional planning policies in 1999. Despite these efforts, most analysts contend that the integration of sustainability in the main policy sectors remains very

⁸ Membership figures in 1995 for the country’s major environmental NGOs are informative: Friends of the Earth counted 5,000 French members against 220,000 in Germany, World Wildlife Federation (WWF)-France had 170,500 members against 690,000 Dutch counterparts, and Greenpeace had only 35,000 French activists against more than 500,000 in Germany and the Netherlands (van der Heijden, 1997).

⁹ The national fate of Agenda 21 illustrates the poor ability of French political culture to accommodate the new integrative concept of sustainability. In addition to a patent lack of political and financial support, Agenda 21 has suffered from a competing national program (*Chartes de l’Environnement*) that has contributed to the relative backwardness of France in this field. Based on data from the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), Szarka (2002) notes that by 1997 only fifteen French local authorities had drawn up (or were in the process of formulating) Agenda 21 plans, in comparison to 415 in Norway, 285 in Britain, and 30 in Germany. It was not until the beginning of the 2000s that the program (renamed *Action 21*) was integrated into a national sustainable development strategy.

⁷ This weakness was exposed right from the beginning, when the first minister for the environment, Poujade, resigned after three years in office and crudely stated that his ministry was “the ministry of the impossible” (Poujade, 1975).

partial, a view confirmed by the extreme weakness of the CFDD, the main organization charged with devising proactive strategies in this domain (Larrue and Chabason 1998).

Conventional Policies: the Greening of Consumption in France

Given that the national political culture has not embraced sustainability's integrative orientation, it should come as no surprise that the concept of sustainable consumption has not yet taken root in French environmental policy. Despite the tentative uptake of elements of sustainable development, at present no clearly identifiable approach is geared toward environmentally sound consumption. Worse still, this emergent policy domain has yet to be defined as such in France, either in official documents or by the main governmental agencies in charge of formulating strategies. Research initiatives in this field have been scattered among wider, or differently defined, bodies of research.¹⁰ Typically, too, national progress reports for the international audience have tended to use a "re-labeling" tactic based simply on renaming existing (production-oriented) policies to fit into the field defined by the fourth chapter of Agenda 21.¹¹

However, if French endeavors do not compare favorably with the comprehensive approaches developed by the European Commission and the pioneering programs of forerunner nations such as Sweden and the Netherlands, it the country has not been totally inactive in this area. The following section reviews the main "sustainable consumption" policy tools that have been developed in France.

Showing the Way: Green Public Procurement

The French government, which is directly responsible for twenty percent of the country's gross national product, was relatively quick to integrate environmental concerns into the administration's daily routines. Nonetheless, the country's first comprehensive greening scheme, launched in 1995, was barely implemented due to a lack of resources and political resolve (OECD, 2000). In 1999, the greening of the administration (*le verdissement des administrations*) received new impetus from the red-green government, and the top-down approach established in 1995 was supplemented with a series of measures allowing local authorities to include the environment as a (non-discriminatory) criterion for making local procurement decisions. This initiative received the support of the *Eco-Maires*, an association of more than 600 mayors that coordinates a number of voluntary initiatives to encourage environmentally responsible purchasing at the local level.

More recently, the Environment Ministry specifically addressed the question of green procurement by central administrations (*les achats verts des*

administrations) and announced the creation of a specially trained corps of civil servants that is to be exclusively responsible for this task using tools such as eco-labels and life-cycle analysis (MEDD web-site, 2001). The administration should soon have a comprehensive tool for implementing the systematic greening of its procurement decisions. The extent to which this is actually the case will, of course, depend on the commitment of future governments and the powers granted to the new green purchasing officials.

Internalizing Environmental Costs: Ecological Taxation

The idea of reducing the consumption of polluting products through taxation is not new in France. As early as 1974, the Gruson Report made explicit reference to the possibility of using such mechanisms—in conjunction with other even more innovative measures—to reduce what the French call *le gaspillage*, a notion inelegantly translated as "wasteful" consumption.¹² Although few of the document's recommendations were implemented, it was instrumental in triggering what became the national approach to "environmental consumption" during the 1970s and 1980s, namely an emphasis on waste and energy management policies driven by a set of producer-oriented fiscal incentives and disincentives (e.g., 1975 and 1992 Waste Acts).

It was not until the late-1990s that the government seriously examined this approach and modified the taxation system toward an integrated method more consistent with conventional notions of eco-taxation. Carefully prepared by Environment Minister Voynet immediately after her appointment in 1997, the *Taxe générale sur les activités polluantes (TGAP)* was approved in 1999 after long and difficult negotiations.¹³ In brief, the main innovation in this plan was the creation of an integrated and easily extendable framework regrouping the previously ad hoc set of ecologically related taxes. In addition, this overarching structure—explicitly designed to accommodate a future EU-wide carbon tax—introduced the principle of proportionality between pollution and taxation and established a double-dividend system, in which the revenues of the tax are directly re-invested in anti-pollution programs.

This new framework has not met all of its original objectives, and a series of political and technical problems have prevented the tax from applying to specific

¹⁰ The Inter-Institutional Research Program in Environmental Economics (PIREE) is an example.

¹¹ A case in point is the country profile that France submitted in 1998 to UNCED for information-sharing purposes—and only partially improved in 2001 (see IFEN, 1998).

¹² An Environment Ministry desperate to strengthen its legitimacy commissioned this report when a severe economic crisis was threatening its very existence. The document recommended dramatically reducing all sorts of consumption activities through innovative measures. Commenting on the report, Szarka (2002) notes that "[i]n stressing clean production and highlighting the problems of intensive agriculture, it anticipated some of the theses of ecological modernisation. Proposals such as increased flexi-time and distance working were ahead of their times, but recommendations for reduction in energy use (by improved building insulation and better public transport) were speedily implemented."

¹³ The bill became a lightning rod for hostile protests by truck drivers who objected to a tax increase on diesel fuel. Additionally, after being ruled unconstitutional by the *Conseil d'Etat*, the proposed legislation was modified by thousands of amendments in Parliament and redrafted at the end of 2000.

activities or products (e.g., electricity, water). Moreover, the *TGAP* seems to lack a consumer-oriented approach. Unlike the “eco-VAT” scheme in Belgium, or the so-called “pay-as-you-throw” (PAYT) programs used in the United States, few of the *TGAP* outcomes have directly raised awareness among consumers who, for political reasons, were not directly targeted by the proposal. As a result, despite the gradual implementation of a proportional ecological tax, it is still difficult to speak of a comprehensive eco-taxation system in France.¹⁴ More generally, the internalization of environmental costs in market prices still fits uneasily with the French interventionist and neo-corporatist tradition. In addition to the problems created by well-established lobbies—for example, the automobile industry—“brown” subsidies remain in agriculture and water management. Similarly, despite commendable achievements in public transport (e.g., national railways and urban tramways), road tolls are still uncommon, as are such practices as car-sharing and recycling.¹⁵

Providing Information: Eco-labeling

At first glance, the French situation regarding eco-labeling appears quite paradoxical. On one hand, while none of the independent eco-labels has managed to achieve the level of national recognition enjoyed by, for example, the German Blue Angel or the Nordic Swan, France is currently the European leader in the use of the EU’s flower eco-label.¹⁶ On the other hand, the country lags behind its European counterparts in terms of International Standards Organization (ISO) and Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) certified producers (IFEN, 2001a). At the same time, France offers more established certification schemes than any other European country in terms of non-environment-related labels and seals. It can be argued that this apparent contradiction is mainly the result of two countervailing tendencies. First, it is a long-acknowledged tenet that the French have traditionally been unreceptive to green consumerism, and this disposition helps to explain the absence of a major independent eco-label, as well as the limited interest in EMAS and ISO certification.¹⁷ Second, the long tradition of food-labeling initiated by the famous

*Appellations d’Origine Contrôlée*¹⁸ (AOC) has endowed the country with considerable certification expertise and greatly contributed to the creation of entrenched accreditation bodies such as the powerful *Association Française de Normalisation* (AFNOR). AFNOR sponsored the first national eco-label—the *NF Environnement*—in 1992 and is charged with developing the EU environmental label in France. This helps to explain why the “flower” has been comparatively successful, especially in the absence of a major national competitor.

If the above arguments offer some insight into the seemingly contradictory situation of eco-labeling in France, they do not account for the weakness of green consumerism and eco-labels in the first place. In this regard, the most plausible hypothesis is once again the existence of a vicious circle sustained by both the lack of intermediary bodies and the apparent apathy of the public regarding environmental issues. In the relative absence of active and powerful environmental NGOs (normally the key policy coordinators of green consumerism), it is difficult to imagine how French consumers could have developed a particular sensitivity in this regard. While official bodies, such as AFNOR, are pleased to provide eco-certification to companies applying for it, they do not see raising market awareness as their primary responsibility. As a result, their meager communication strategies have not filled the gap created by the lack of committed environmental NGOs. When producers have tried to enter this unmediated zone, they have more often than not ended up in pseudo-scientific battles, an outcome that leads to all parties being discredited and consumers being left increasingly skeptical. Major retailers have been discouraged from entering onto such slippery ground, with the result that few have developed a clear green strategy for their own brands. In addition, particular market conditions have hindered the development of eco-labels for specific products, with food again providing a case in point. Since the Agriculture Biologique *AB* (the French national organic label) was launched in the 1980s, it has had to compete with other well-established quality labels, such as the aforementioned 85-year old *AOCs* and the 40-year old *Label Rouge* designed for meat products. The reputations of the *AOCs* and *Label Rouge* among the French public—who readily associate them with attributes both material (small-scale, quality, *savoir-faire*) and imaginary (*bon-vivant*, traditional values)—has reduced the ability of the organic message to transcend its scientific (“no chemicals/pesticides”) content. Consequently, organic designations have suffered from a negative subtext—the absence of pollution—while more positive values have come to be associated with *les produits du terroir* (rural/regional products) that, by comparison, seem to belong to an epoch or milieu in which nature and culture have not been divorced.

Of course, all these representations are changing rapidly, and the recent rise in popularity of organic products shows that symbolic associations are under constant collective re-evaluation, especially when they benefit from favorable structural factors such as

¹⁴ In its study of eco-taxation, the OECD (2001) rated France 15 out of 28 countries for revenues per capita raised in this manner. More recently, France was ranked last in Europe for the proportion of environmentally related taxes as a proportion of total revenues (European Environment Agency, 2002).

¹⁵ France’s solid waste-recycling rate is still comparatively low, since few people make regular use of separate containers (IFEN, 2001b).

¹⁶ At the end of 2001, France had twenty certified products, while, by comparison, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom had two and one respectively (Flower News, 2001).

¹⁷ The worldwide boycott of Shell, organized by Greenpeace at the end of the 1990s, is a case in point. While the campaign was successful in many northern European countries, it was a total failure in France. Reflecting on the difficulty of using green consumerism as an operational approach in France, Szarka (2002) notes “Whilst in the UK Friends of the Earth built its reputation on ‘green consumer’ issues...the French branch was unable to touch the public imagination in the same way.”

¹⁸ *AOCs* legally protect the production processes of many wines, cheeses and olive oils.

government subsidies. However, this case underlines how the discourse touted by eco-labels (i.e., environmentally friendly) is confronted all along its development with a pre-existing set of values and representations—for example, about the nature of sustainability, countryside, and health—that strongly determines its relative significance, and thus its final success, within a given cultural setting. In France, the prevalent rural perception of self has resulted in the failure of many ecologically focused messages to capture the Romantically inclinations of consumers who, especially when it comes to food, tend to relate sustainability primarily to its cultural dimension. Often, they interpret sustainability in a way that goes beyond (or sometimes, perhaps, nowhere near) the message normally contained by the eco-labels themselves.¹⁹

More generally, the slow uptake of eco-labeling in France demonstrates how the absence of credible information from environmental NGOs has hindered the development of a “green consumerism reflex,” making it difficult for any significant eco-label to emerge. From this perspective, it seems likely that as long as prevalent public perceptions are not seriously challenged by new political developments—for example, environmental crises or powerful activist groups—eco-labels in France will remain scarce. In other words, French consumers will continue to view eco-labels rather suspiciously so that they will contribute little to sustainable consumption.

Raising Awareness: Education Campaigns

To some extent, environmental-information campaigns have suffered from many of the structural shortcomings observed in the case of eco-taxation and eco-labeling. Here, again, the weakness of NGOs, the segmented nature of environmental policies, and the widespread individualism (and sometimes cynicism) found among the population, have contributed to a general apathy toward the environment. The absence of a single national, multifaceted environmental campaign targeted directly at consumers (such as the British *Going for Green* initiative) illustrates the limited way that French authorities have used social-marketing techniques. In addition, those public programs that have been launched have generally been aimed at the least emblematic types of material provisioning, such as energy or water consumption. The *Agence de l'Environnement et de la Maîtrise de l'Energie* (ADEME), for instance, has a long history of disseminating information on how to reduce domestic energy utilization.²⁰ In a typically French neo-corporatist arrangement, ADEME has linked up with EDF (the national electricity producer) to distribute countless tips to assess and to reduce

electricity consumption through leaflets, brochures, and the Internet (ADEME website, 2002; see also Szarka, 2000). Along these lines, in 2001, a national network of *points-info energie* (energy-information points) was launched for individual consumers and small- and medium-sized businesses, offering direct guidance about the various ways they could cut energy consumption. Yet, if these campaigns were useful for channeling information on the impact of daily energy consumption, their fragmented and practical content betrayed their origins in technical bodies and precluded the opening of an ethical debate about more symptomatic forms of consumption.

In this regard, the “lifestyle” message contained in the operation *En ville sans ma voiture* (Car-Free Day in Town—to date the most prominent government program) is potentially significant. Adopted by more than seventy cities throughout the country, this campaign has prompted a noticeable renewal of interest in alternative local transport solutions, and more generally in the environmental aspects of urban life. In many cities, this new impetus has been followed by operations such as the *nuits piétonnes* (pedestrian nights) or the *soirée roller* (roller-skating only evenings) now common throughout the country. In addition, it has also encouraged more adventurous local experiments, such as the *vélo à la carte* (bike-sharing) scheme in Rennes. While this project is not yet a roaring success, its existence testifies, nonetheless, to a recent change in attitude among many municipalities.²¹ In spite of these encouraging efforts, though, France’s backwardness in the information domain is clearly apparent when one considers, for instance, the dearth of comprehensive French websites on sustainable consumption.²²

This brief overview of conventional policy tools highlights two essential points. On the one hand, encouraging trends have been recently observed (e.g., *TGAP*, EU-Flower), and other developments—including the emergence of eco-design techniques and “ethical” financial products—augur a better visibility for the environmental impacts of consumption. On the other hand, the relevant mechanisms are scattered and undeveloped, and the concept of sustainable consumption has not found a proper semantic space in French policymaking terminology.²³ Moreover, major obstacles remain, given the way the debate is being framed and mediated nationally. In particular, the environment-consumption interface still is

²¹ Two hundred bicycles have been available free of charge at 25 stations in the city since 1998 (see Rennes website, 2002).

²² With the exception of the burgeoning *action-consommation* network (see *Action Consommation* website, 2003), almost all French-language Internet sources specifically dedicated to these issues have emanated from Canada, Switzerland, or Belgium. A good example is the *Eco-conso* network, a Belgian initiative that maintains a website exclusively focused on sustainable consumption and provides both practical and theoretical information on many aspects of green consumerism (see *Eco-conso* website, 2002).

²³ Although occasionally employed, the most logical translation (*Consommation durable*) is somewhat awkward since *durable* in a consumption context usually connotes “expensive”—as in the expression *consommation de biens durables* (consumption of durable goods). In turn, the two remaining solutions (*eco-consommation*—the favored choice of Belgians—or *consommation soutenable*—the preferred choice of French-speaking Canadians—are either conceptually restrictive or disconnected from the term sustainable development (*développement durable*)).

¹⁹ It could be argued that the same phenomenon is at work when one considers the relatively small number of vegetarians in France, as well as the generally weak support for animal rights—this in a country where the most revered dish, *foie gras*, is produced using the rather cruel, ancestral tradition of *gavage des oies* (goose cramming). Far from being seen as brutal by the majority, this practice has actually come to symbolize what the southwestern traditions and values stand for in the French imagination (e.g. frankness, courage, simplicity). Hunting—though to a much lesser extent—is protected by the same tendency to put *les traditions rurales* (the countryside traditions) beyond ecological and “sustainable” scrutiny.

²⁰ *Agence de l'Environnement et de la Maîtrise de l'Energie* is the official body in charge of supervising national energy consumption.

largely organized around an “ecological modernization of production” perspective that has conveniently allowed national policymakers to avoid reminding consumers of their unique responsibilities, and to subtly bypass the key issue of the limits to consumption. Along these lines, the notion of *consomma(c)teur* (citizen-consumer) proposed by some authors does not yet seem applicable in a country still lacking powerful actors capable of pushing such policies to the political forefront (Leroy, 2001; Mariaccia, 2002).

However, if the lack of alternative proposals is evident from an environmental standpoint, the debates about social justice, the (re)distribution of resources, and the protection of cultural diversity are more conducive for questioning both current consumption practices and the socio-economic mechanisms that sustain them. The following section investigates some of these developments.

Reshaping the Framework of Consumption: Social Changes, Sustainability, and Consumption in France

If green consumerism and the ecological modernization of consumption have hardly challenged the paradigmatic commitment of French policymakers to economic growth, other critical forces have nevertheless actively influenced in the national debate about alternative lifestyles and/or societal (re)organization. This section discusses three different instances of this growing social self-reflexivity towards consumption and the quality of everyday life. The first part describes recent institutional efforts to encourage a better distribution of wealth and work within the population (the 35-hour week), paying particular attention to the consequences of this new set of policies in terms of consumption patterns, lifestyles, and values. The second part identifies the main actors, networks, and ideas that have expressed the recent revival of anti-consumerism in France, assessing in the process the extent to which this emerging discursive coalition has taken root within the national political landscape. The final part clarifies the circumstances in which the entire spectrum of French political forces (i.e., both official and non-institutional spheres) have joined forces to trigger a sort of national “discriminating consumerism” during international negotiations on issues implicitly connected with environment and consumption.

Sharing Work through Social Reform: The 35-Hour Week

The latest manifestation of the French inclination for social interventionism, the 35-Hour Week Act (*réduction du temps de travail*, or *RTT*), was the cornerstone of the political program proposed by the socialist/communist/green coalition in power between 1997 and 2002.²⁴ In contrast with previous reforms, however,

²⁴ In terms of working time, three main historical phases are generally distinguished. The first phase (from 1848 to 1936) is a period when the first limitations appeared in legislation regarding maximum working time, minimum working age, and so forth. These measures are justified almost exclusively in terms of health and safety. The second phase extends from 1936 (the year at which the 40-hour week, plus two weeks per year of paid holiday, was implemented) until the mid-1970s, when the reduction of working time was justified in terms of a balancing act between monetary

this scheme was not so much about “reducing” work as “communalizing” it. The main challenge was to tackle unemployment through a better repartition of work, a goal pursued under the double constraint of neither reducing salaries nor weakening national productivity. To make this possible, the scheme offered everyone something in exchange for his or her purported sacrifice. Employees gained an average of four additional hours of free time per week without salary reduction; in return, they were to moderate future salary demands and to renegotiate their work contracts to allow more flexibility over the year (*annualisation*).²⁵ Employers had their national insurance contributions reduced for newly hired staff, in addition to enhanced flexibility (and therefore better productivity). Overtime work was discouraged by imposing heavy taxation, and the diminution in employers’ national insurance contributions was financed by the state with the money it saved by cutting the number of unemployment benefit claims.

Although repeatedly ridiculed by neo-classical economists throughout the world (e.g., Graham, 1998; *The Economist*, 2000), as well as at home by right-wing parties and employer associations, the law was passed in June, 1998. It took effect in 2000 for large businesses and in 2002 for small- and medium-sized firms. Although it is still early to draw definitive conclusions, with perhaps the exception that unemployment figures have changed little, most analysts have thus far deemed the program to be a success (eg., Hutton, 2001).²⁶

Impacts of the 35-Hour Week on Consumption

Large-scale, scientifically monitored studies of the 35-hour week’s macro-economic effects on household consumption will not be available until the end of 2004 (Viard, 2002). However, commentators have been surprised by preliminary data suggesting that many basic social behaviors have undergone a marked evolution in a relatively short period.

First, it is instructive to start by considering how the *RTT* has been interpreted in terms of altered work patterns. Since negotiations concerning increased flexibility took place primarily at the level of each individual company, employees appear to be reallocating their four additional free hours per week in different ways. Table 1

income and living conditions. The abundance of work during this period created an “over-time” culture that prompted regulation. The third phase—from the mid-1970s until the present—has been marked by rising unemployment and this situation has created a political rationale to shift toward the concept of “work-sharing.” If the 39-hour week (plus five weeks per year of paid holiday) enacted in 1981 is still essentially explainable as a political gesture from the left-wing government that came to power after more than thirty years in opposition, the 35-hour week created in 2003 is itself an authentic illustration of the “work-sharing” doctrine.

²⁵ This element of flexibility was instrumental in getting the (moderate) support of rural communities where the organization of annual work (*annualisation*) proved adaptable to the highly seasonal patterns of agrarian economies.

²⁶ Although France experienced a sharp decline in unemployment during the period 1997-2002 (roughly from 13 percent to 8.6 percent), the portion attributable to the *RTT* appears to account for less than one point of this decrease (between 250,000 and 500,000 jobs directly created by *RTT* in 2002—the objectives were for about 700,000). However, productivity does not seem to have been adversely affected and, from a social standpoint, the reform has been a resounding success (e.g., *The Guardian*, 2002; *Le Monde*, 2001a; *News Weekly* 2001).

displays the main tendencies in 2001. The most striking feature is the remarkable diversity in the types of arrangements—in other words, the numerous ways in which the reduction in working hours has translated concretely into new daily routines. The most readily visible effect of the reform has been a considerable “smoothing” effect on the structure of social times, with traditional peak hours in transport, leisure, and shopping now increasingly spread over a broader span (Viard, 2002).

Table 1 The Implementation of the 35-Hour Week: The Multiple Arrangements.

Arrangement	Percent
Reduction from 7.75 to 7-hour working day	13
Extra days off per month	21
Extra half-day off per week	13
Extra day off every other week	7
Extra time “on account”	4
7.5-hour working day plus extra weeks of holiday per year	7
Other (including a mix of the above)	35

Source: Adapted from Touriscopie (2001) and Viard (2002)

For instance, the trend toward longer weekends—typically three to four days—has contributed to a shift of the congestion peaks from the traditional pattern of Mondays and Fridays to Tuesday mornings and Thursday afternoons. This “smoothing” effect also represents a time gain, because it limits the delays caused by concentration of activity. Most markedly, the *RTT* has reduced queuing time in shops, public transport, roads, and highways during the usual rush hours (7-9 am and 5-7 pm), as well as during national holidays and summer-travel periods.

In more qualitative terms, the reform’s main impact on everyday life to date seems to be its clear effect on the status of non-commercially related activities. These trends were already apparent in surveys investigating what people intended to do with their additional free time before the implementation of the *RTT* (see, for instance, Mazzoli, 1999; Ipsos-Bates, 1999). More recent studies of actual behavior have begun to confirm these initial findings (e.g., *CFDT*, 2001; Viard, 2002). For example, Table 2 shows the results of a survey carried out for ministerial services in 2001. In terms of consumption, these results indicate that the main effects of the *RTT* are much more qualitative (consuming differently) than quantitative (consuming more or less). In addition to friend- and family-related activities—which appear to be the “big winners” of the reform—the main beneficiaries include a range of personal leisure and domestic-production activities, such as walking, reading, gardening, cooking, and watching television, that are drawn together under the survey’s first and second headings (Viard, 2002). Even the tourism sector (predicted to boom under the new arrangement) seems destined to remain approximately at its prior level, because most of the increasingly prevalent “short breaks” away from home are taken primarily within an enlarged “domestic” framework (i.e., a second home, at friends’ and families’ homes; see Touriscopie, 2001).

Shopping habits have also undergone significant transformations, with most basic provisioning—for example, food shopping—spread over the week, as opposed to concentrated on Saturdays. This day of the week, traditionally France’s shopping day because of the

very small number of shops open on Sundays, is now increasingly dedicated either to “personal leisure” as mentioned above, or to more indulgent acts of consumption that require meticulous selection (e.g., reading books or listening to audio recordings).²⁷ Overall, these preliminary results clearly show that new consumption strategies are emerging, and that the time gained from work reduction saves extra time normally expended in such situations as constrained shopping or traffic jams. This displacement has, in turn, freed up blocks of time in which people favor essentially less commoditized activities—for example, personal development and family—or where previously tedious routine activities, such as supermarket shopping, transport, and cooking, have been turned back into pleasurable activities (e.g., shopping in town markets, cycling, creative cooking; see *Le Monde*, 2001a).

Table 2 What Does the 35-Hour Week Allow You to Do?

Activity	Percent
Spend more time with children/family	52
Rest more	35
Participate in more sporting activities	34
Go out for “cultural purposes” (e.g., museums, cinema, theatre, concert)	18
Get involved in associations and NGOs	11
Participate in training and learning activities	6
Travel more	3
Consume/purchase more	2
Does not change anything	6

Source: Adapted from *Ministère de l’Emploi et de la Solidarité* (MES 2001)

In addition, the domestic-gender partition has changed, although it is not yet clear whether this trend will eventually translate into a less biased chore distribution (Viard, 2002). While cooking and shopping arrangements seem more equitable, it is not yet evident whether this represents a more general phenomenon or a simple widening of traditional divisions, as holds for “do-it-yourself” home improvements or ironing, where each partner appears to shoulder more of their conventionally proscribed tasks.

Lastly, the reform seems to have triggered potentially far-reaching changes in perceptions and beliefs. Some studies have identified a correlation between the *RTT*’s implementation and the respective emphasis given to various “life-defining values,” with a marked tendency to devote greater importance to non-materialist needs at the expense of materialist desires (see, for instance, *MES*, 2001; *CFDT*, 2001; *L’Express*, 2002). Of course, such results need to be qualified in several respects. First, this trend has been consistently observed in France since the economic crisis of the 1980s (Volatier, 1995). Moreover, in a context of rapid socio-economic changes (at the time of the *RTT* surveys, 2000-2002, France was witnessing a steady decrease in unemployment figures) it is hard to distinguish reform-induced changes from other factors.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, most commentators agree that the new work arrangements

²⁷ French regulations still consider Sundays to be *jours de repos* (resting days). The premium for hours worked on Sundays (typically about double-time) is comparable to the rate that applies for work at night or on national holidays.

have—at least to a certain degree—accelerated a re-evaluation of non-materialist aspirations (e.g., Viard, 2002; *Le Monde*, 2001b; *L'Express*, 2001). For example, in the post-implementation study discussed above, the *RTT* questionnaire ended by asking: “What would you prefer in the future?” Interestingly, a majority of respondents (54 percent) chose “earning less money” over “earning more and having less free time” (41 percent) (*MES*, 2001). A more recent national poll, carried out for a reputable periodical, reported similar results: a record eight out of ten respondents asserted that private life (ie., personal activities, family life) was their first source of “accomplishment” (*L'Express*, 2002). In the same survey, fewer than two out of three respondents deemed success in professional life “essential.” Moreover, among individuals who viewed their professional life in such terms, the measure of success was primarily defined as personal interest in the job.

These findings tend to support the hypothesis that, in addition to changing the structural conditions of consumption (more time, same wages), the 35-hour reform actually supports, and perhaps even accelerates, a cultural shift away from a number of materialist values. Some observers have even described the reform’s socio-cultural impacts as “revolutionary” (e.g., *Guardian*, 2002). In any case, the *RTT* has undoubtedly stimulated a degree of self-reflexivity among French consumers and encouraged a collective reassessment of a range of needs, desires, and values directly related to questions concerning the appropriate form and level of consumption—for example, how much is enough?

A More Sustainable Consumption?

Notwithstanding the underlying cultural changes induced by the reform, it presently seems premature to say whether this new framework will entail a purely quantitative decrease in national consumption. A smaller proportion of unemployed consumers, after all, could quite conceivably lead to the opposite outcome. In this sense, it may be the case that the *RTT*’s net effect on aggregate material provisioning, at least in the short term, will actually be positive.²⁸ Even so, the realignment of working hours in France could nevertheless be instrumental in ensuring a more equitable distribution of labor and free time that would contribute to social cohesion, arguably an essential feature of social sustainability. Similarly, it is possible to assume that many forms of conspicuous consumption could be, if not completely halted, at least significantly restrained by a program that creates de facto limits on personal income by, for example, imposing high taxes on overtime work. Such a measure would dampen consumers’ actual purchasing power, as well as their material aspirations. In this respect, the 35-hour reform can be envisioned as directly connected with sustainable consumption.

Although France is not the first to implement this type of policy, the country’s size—58 million people—sets it apart. Moreover, the policy is being pursued in a

relatively short timeframe and with the strong support of a population typically removed from the kind of “overtime culture” that is still common elsewhere (Carvel, 2002).

As remarkable as these developments might be, one should be careful when interpreting them through the lens of sustainable consumption. Indeed, while the *RTT* seems to be having a restraining effect on individual consumption and encourages lifestyle re-evaluation, we should keep in mind that only the rampant unemployment that has plagued France for more than two decades made it politically acceptable.²⁹ This makes it easy to understand why proponents’ arguments have remained focused on economic growth—and thus increased levels of consumption—and also why government officials have otherwise adopted a resolutely business-friendly attitude in other sectors, such as advertising. From this perspective, the *RTT* (and the structural changes it entails) should not be interpreted as a conscious, paradigmatic shift towards sustainable consumption. To find political support for such a change in France, one has to look instead at the rather nebulous wave of anti-consumerism that has been alive in the country since 1968, and which has recently seemed to take on a new momentum.

Institutions Challenged: The Revival of French Anti-consumerism

With broad ideological support from elite national publications, such as *Le Monde Diplomatique* and *Le Canard Enchaîné*, as well as from newer periodicals, such as *Silence*, the activist segment of the French anti-consumerist movement is roughly divided into two main groups. First, a number of organizations have gathered around the denunciation of broadly defined “consumerism,” with a clear tendency to choose the world of advertising (and especially “hegemonic” brands) as their primary target. Examples include *RAP* (*Résistance à l’Aggression Publicitaire*), an association that has been active since 1992 and that seeks

[T]o identify the advertising processes aiming at conditioning the consumer and the citizen; to promote (possibly through individual or collective resistance acts) the vote of laws protecting the liberties threatened by these processes; to lobby elected politicians...and to encourage the creation of non-alienating forms of communication (*RAP* website, 2002).

Many of the association’s campaigns have used a discursive mix of anti-consumerism and environmentalism and, quite significantly, its activism has encroached on various cultural issues. For example, *RAP* organizes “action-cinéma,” consisting of demonstrations at movie theaters to protest the replacement of traditional art forms (pre-screening short films) with commercial advertisements. Of course, *RAP* is only one example among

²⁸ This occurs because at a similar level of income, an unemployed person spends one quarter of the sum expended by an employed person (Viard, 2002).

²⁹ It should be noted that the *RTT* does not encompass many affluent, independent professionals such as attorneys, physicians, or senior executives. Moreover, the current right-wing government (in place since May 2002) has introduced measures to limit the reform’s impact, notably by reducing the taxes that apply to overtime work (*The Guardian*, 2002).

a global network of similarly attuned organizations that disseminate alternative ideas at a national level and that encourage acts of resistance, such as “Buy Nothing Day” (*La journée sans achat*) and “No Television Week” (*La semaine sans télé*). Other forms of protest against commercial exploitation of events, such as Christmas or the recently imported celebration of Halloween, have taken place. This network of anti-consumerists includes, for instance, the Lyons-based *Casseur de pub* (inspired by its Canadian counterpart the Adbusters Media Foundation), *Le Publiphobe*, the association *Chiche* (the youth branch of the Green Party) or *Resistance Verte* (a Geneva-based association specifically focusing on the environment-consumption interface). In addition, this network has developed close links with a number of influential authors and journalists who, like Naomi Klein (1999) in the English-speaking world, have exposed what they call the “totalitarianism of advertisement.”³⁰

Notwithstanding the growing influence of these radical groups, the second set of dissident voices has attracted the largest amount of support so far. By means of highly structured positions on international issues such as Third World debt and international trade disputes, this faction has been led by the association Action for a Tobin Tax to Assist the Citizen (*ATTAC*), a rapidly expanding NGO with more than 30,000 active members in France (80,000 members worldwide) in 2002, which had achieved international recognition in less than five years. Originally set up to lobby for the Tobin Tax, this association has embraced a wider agenda, including a well-articulated anti-consumerist stance (*ATTAC* website, 2002a, 2002b). While it is still too early to assess its national impact, many observers claim (and many signs show) that—in conjunction with a number of other closely aligned organizations—*ATTAC* has garnered notice at the highest levels of French politics. The organization has contributed to spectacular changes in policymakers’ attitudes on issues such as the role of the World Trade Organization, the use of tax havens, the application of the precautionary principle, and the status of genetically modified foods.³¹

In addition to *ATTAC*’s watchdog role, in which it publicly denounces proponents of “destructive and unsustainable desires,” the association has supported proactive policies, most notably the use of boycotts and the endorsement of fair-trade products (Pouradier, 2001). Some observers claim that it has also contributed to the renovation of French activism as a whole, notably by clearly dissociating itself from all political parties and focusing primary attention on social issues. By recruiting from all sections of society (including academia), *ATTAC* has also developed an ability to engage both in technical debates and direct action. Moreover, it has been a highly visible component of the anti-globalization movement that formed during the battles of Seattle, Genoa, and Nice,

where activists established strategic links with the “anti-advertising alliance.” It is this burgeoning coalition—promptly joined by other movements, such as the small-farmers union (*Confédération Paysanne*) of José Bové—that gradually came to form the French “delegation” at numerous international demonstrations during the late 1990s.

Among its many distinctive features, this national assemblage of anti-consumerist organizations has perpetuated a French tradition of stiff cultural resistance against a number of emblematic commodities and prompted several international trade disputes between France and its allies. It is to this essential element of the relationship between French political culture and consumption that the discussion now turns.

From Political Culture to Cultural Politics: French “Discriminating Consumerism” and the Defense of National “Values” in the WTO Battles

On the few occasions where the old French republican-unity reflex—the alliance of institutional forces and civil society for a particular cause—has been triggered of late, cultural themes have been at the core of the argument. In other words, “culture” has provided the main discursive channel for the nation’s capacity to reflect on consumption and new forms of interventionism. This particular response was prominent during a couple of recent trade negotiations that successively dealt with two of the most revered elements of French culture: cinema and food.

The first of these disputes took place in 1993 during the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). France rejected an American demand to further liberalize the market for cultural goods, a measure that would have meant an end to the domestic quotas and subsidies that sustain the creation and distribution of French films, books, television programs, and music. Supported strongly by the Canadians, this refusal came to be known as *l’exception culturelle* (the cultural exception), a notion that has since been erected as a principle in French politics and is now widely regarded as non-negotiable across the national political spectrum (Trautmann, 1999). If economic arguments were obviously influential in shaping this position—France, the birthplace of cinema, is the world’s third largest film producer behind the United States and India—the lively domestic debate that took place during the negotiations showed that, above all else, the nation’s cultural identity and lifestyle were perceived to be at stake (Burin des Rozières, 1998).

The argument was that certain goods were “special,” in that they embodied the “fields of collective reflexivity” and mediated the symbolic expressions of the community’s character. Films—as well as music, books, and theatrical performances—were thus seen as structuring the community’s ethics. In other words, these cultural creations represented a series of nodal points in the transmission of language and values within—and beyond—the national culture. A consensus then emerged regarding the fact that such products should not be relegated to the global free-market, where their relative vulnerability could have meant their disappearance (Warnier, 1999).

While this debate clearly triggered nationwide self-reflexivity about the role of cultural consumption, it

³⁰ In France, these authors include Koechlin de Bizemont and Grapas (1975), or more recently Frédéric Beigbeder (the author of the 2000 best seller *99FF* that sold more than 300,000 copies), and Florence Amadou (a *Le Monde* journalist and author of the acclaimed *Le livre noir de la pub*) (Amadou, 2001).

³¹ In 2000, *ATTAC*’s influence on the French political scene was demonstrated by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin’s decision to support the Tobin Tax—a first for a G7 leader.

was soon followed by another famous episode which put analogous constructions to similar ends. The United States-European Union dispute over hormone-treated beef once again exposed the key function of consumption in constructing national identity. Disregarding the precautionary principle, the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruled in 1998 that in the absence of scientific evidence, the European ban over American hormone-treated beef was not justified. As a result, the WTO permitted the United States to retaliate, and taxes on a number of European goods were increased by 100 percent. The American response, in particular, targeted traditional French products such as *Dijon* mustard, *Roquefort* cheese, and *Foie Gras*.³² The decision caused an upheaval in Europe, and French farmers—headed by sheep-breeder José Bové and backed by thousands of anti-globalization activists—attacked symbols of what they considered to be American corporate imperialism, calling for an “agricultural” exception (*exception agricole*) while dismantling a McDonald’s outlet under construction in the small town of Millau.³³ As a result, Bové became a hero of the cultural resistance and later a national martyr when imprisoned for three months.

Although quite trivial by themselves, these events actually had an extremely significant effect on French public opinion. Once again, emblematic objects of consumption—hormone-treated beef, *Roquefort* cheese, McDonald’s hamburgers—occupied center stage in the clash between two sets of values (themselves symbolizing different forms of social development), and immediately reinforced the binary moot associations that had surfaced during the battle over *l’exception culturelle*. On the one hand, a link was made between entities such as small-scale farming, the precautionary principle, “independent” cinema, and active resistance against big corporations. On the other hand, a connection was established between the United States, Hollywood, hormone-treated beef, the WTO, and global food distribution chains such as McDonald’s. It is clear, of course, which of these assemblages came to be associated with “sustainability” in the French mind. This dichotomous vision has obviously been strongly reinforced by more recent international developments, including the war in Iraq.³⁴

Two aspects concerning these events seem particularly significant. First, in both cases the discursive channel of “culture” (coupled in the second case with “nature”) has come to repudiate certain forms of consumption (i.e., Hollywood films, hormone-treated beef) that many in France perceive as detrimental to the collective best interest. In brief, the global, culturally insensitive qualities of these products render them ill-adapted to the community’s value system, especially in the face of their seemingly hegemonic predisposition. In other words, the propensity of these goods to obliterate competition through large economies of scale is often accompanied by an ostensible lowering of quality. Thus, French government officials support this resistance to protect cultural diversity and to keep the stock of social development options as open and varied as possible.

Second, in both cases, the products at stake were felt to transcend their status as mere commodities, to actually become value-laden, symbolic forms of consumption. In other words, art and food were true metaphorical expressions of the community’s *savoir-vivre*. Unlike automobiles or refrigerators, the transformation of the creation-production processes by culturally blind and exclusively profit-driven interests would not only imply a modification in the products’ style, but would be an extensive mutation of the meaning attached to their consumption. The entire value system on which they are based would be compromised. This explanation highlights why the discursive mix that justified the restrictions was very much inspired by the precautionary principle that is found, for instance, in the controversy over genetically-modified food. In this instance, however, the critique was harnessed to a cultural *problématique*.

How, then, is the French “discriminating consumerism” relevant from the perspective of sustainable consumption? Of course, the point here is neither to assert the intrinsically sustainable quality of French commodities nor to praise the virtues of protectionism per se.³⁵ However, the French response witnessed in the course of these events casts a light on two key political aspects of sustainable consumption.

First, it illustrates the significance of national culture in the transformation of consumption patterns. As

³² Britain, for instance, was not subject to the sanctions, since the Blair government had made it clear that it wanted to end the EU-import ban.

³³ Lynas (1999) captured the tone of the dispute when he wrote, “With a characteristic French flair for symbolism, the mayor of a small village, St-Pierre-de-Trivisy, retaliated by doubling the price of *Coca-Cola* sold at the town’s amenity centres.” The choice of McDonald’s as a target for protesters’ anger is also revealing because it illustrates the historical difficulty that France has had coming to terms with this particular form of consumption. Indeed, the country’s fast-food outlets stand accused of all sorts of evil and, in the public’s mind, epitomize the industrial grip on the food chain. It is not uncommon to see violent attacks being perpetrated against them, despite the company’s efforts to redesign their menu to please the “difficult” French market. For instance, fast-food chains in France—McDonald’s included—offer a large selection of salads, mineral waters, and so forth. Some restaurants have even started, at considerable cost, to incorporate local products (such as *AOC* cheeses) into their offerings.

³⁴ The controversy surrounding the American-British led war in Iraq has clearly reinforced this antagonism. It is interesting to note that, once again in this case, “consumption” has been one of the main channels that have animated the dispute. On one hand, there has been a well-publicized backlash on French products in the United States following the refusal of France to back military intervention (including the infamous “freedom fries”

episode). On the other hand, the American decision to go to war has reinforced and broadened the latent anti-Americanism found in some parts of French society. Two anecdotes help to illustrate these sentiments. In the months leading up to the conflict (November 2002), a French firm headed by a Tunisian-born entrepreneur decided to launch a rival to *Coke* called *Mecca-Cola* and to give 10 percent of the profits to a Palestinian children’s charity. The initiative has been a tremendous success, and more than 2 million bottles were sold in France in the product’s first two months (*The Guardian*, 2003). Also, at the end of the formal conflict in Iraq, the leading comedy show in France (*Les Guignols de l’Info*) depicted American troops landing in the country with bottles of *Coke*, McDonald’s hamburgers, and Disney souvenirs with the subtitle, “Finally, weapons of mass destruction are to be found in Iraq.”

³⁵ Of course, many French artists and cultural goods provide an explicit space for self-reflexivity about (and challenge of) materialistic values—for instance, the works of a film-maker such as Godard, the 1997 blockbuster *Le Bonheur est dans le pré*, or contemporary artists such as Souchon, Noir Désir or Manu Chao. However, this quality is not generally applicable, and is not restricted to, French or European cultural products. The same reasoning applies, of course, to agricultural practices and food products.

the primary force determining, a priori, the relative desirability among various forms of consumption, culture indeed proves to be—for better or worse—the most powerful agent of change (or resistance to change) in consumption habits. From there, it is not difficult to see why the project of sustainable consumption may eventually have to go beyond the technical and economically-mediated assessment of ecological or socio-economic impacts—for example, eco- or fair-trade labels—to acknowledge the entire dialectics at issue and, in particular, the tight relationship linking consumption with various modes of cultural valuation. This point is well encapsulated by the Brundtland Report, when its authors insist that “[s]ustainable development requires the promotion of values that encourage consumption standards that are within the bounds of the ecologically possible” (WCED, 1987, my emphasis). From a major source of resistance, culture could indeed be turned into a vital partner in the implementation of more socially sensitive sustainable consumption policies, that is to say policies informed by an understanding of the whole architecture of societal consumption, including its relational properties. Moreover, as in the case of France, such initiatives would have to assess the desirability of various consumptions, not only on the basis of an ethical label attached a posteriori to the products, but rather on the basis of the values a priori engaged in their production and (non-) consumption, if they are to successfully transmit sustainable habits.³⁶

The second consideration inspired by these episodes is that the French government has demonstrated that it is possible to go beyond the traditional framework of legitimacy to impose restrictions on certain forms of consumption. While public policies governing consumption are usually based on objective-material qualities—for example, those of drugs and weapons—the framing in this case encompasses the subjective-cultural qualities of certain forms of provisioning if they are ostensibly threatened by a dogmatic interpretation of *laissez-faire*. In this case, the French supported new forms of interventionism to counterbalance the pyramidal, capitalistic, and often manipulative way in which consumer desires are manufactured.

In other words, two issues are paramount. First, these disputes facilitated the opening of a national debate about the relative desirability of certain forms of consumption in the name of cultural diversity. Second, it allowed the development of new regulations to ensure that, despite a commitment to free-market principles, different value-laden products—and thus different value systems—can co-exist without imposing a “cultural diktat” on the other(s).

Of course, as with the *RTT*, one should be careful about interpreting these developments in the light of sustainable consumption. However, just as the work-sharing program could eventually alter the configuration of

material desires, this form of discriminating consumerism could be a major step toward alternative provisioning patterns. More than merely illustrating the rather egocentric way that a particular culture intuitively constructs a notion such as sustainability to accommodate its own needs, this approach may actually set a precedent for more universal values underlying the relationship between consumption and quality of life. Indeed, if Cohen (2001) is right that sustainable consumption calls for a “[transformation of] the physical and mental architecture of (post)modernity,” and if cultural diversity is ultimately the think tank that produces innovative “plans,” then the extension of economic or legal protection to the “cultural spaces of self-reflexivity,” as pioneered by the French, could well be the substance from which future “architects” will build “sustainable consumption.” This is especially likely if they aim at challenging not only the conspicuous forms of modern consumption, but also the very ideas and perceptions that promote it.

Conclusion

The concepts of environment and sustainable development in France have not formed a basis for the reassessment of consumption practices. If, following some of its European counterparts, the French government has indeed developed a range of tools to integrate ecological dimensions into market mechanisms, the country’s system of governance and political culture have, nevertheless, largely hindered a truly proactive response to the new agenda of sustainable development, particularly of sustainable consumption. However, a number of other discursive channels have successfully built contingent coalitions that directly address some of the most critical issues regarding sustainable consumption. Through a distributive framework, France has implemented the first national work-sharing program, and the cultural and environmental implications of this initiative are now becoming apparent. At the grassroots level, a diffuse but influential anti-consumerist network has managed—through journals, associations, unions, and opinion leaders—to rejuvenate a culture of resistance against some of the most blatant expressions of materialism in the country, thereby influencing the national debate on sustainable consumption. Concurrently, this “culture of resistance” was transformed into a “resistance on culture” when international trade negotiations prompted nationwide support for the idea that consumer issues may, in some instances, impinge on the very concept of national identity and the right to cultural diversity. As such, this mobilization epitomizes what could develop into the most significant contribution of French political culture to the long-term, global project of sustainable consumption—namely, the identification and the protection of cultural “nodal points” where consumption itself becomes synonymous with the expression of social identity, the (de)construction of needs and desires, and the manifestation of *le droit à la différence*.

Finally, from a more operational perspective, the French case highlights the need for better synergy between the institutional world of green policymaking and the more holistic approach defended by radical groups. If these two

³⁶ In the opposite case, sustainable consumption could indeed face the same limitations of, say, sustainable production through a culturally blind certification process. One can envision a film or a book that conveys an utterly destructive message of ecological nihilism being granted an eco-label for the exemplarily clean processes through which it is produced. For the same reason, a brilliant and influential piece of art extolling material simplicity could stand accused of being printed on non-recycled paper.

camps are often pursuing similar goals, in practice they tend to ignore each other and scarcely join forces to win political battles. The sustainable-consumption debate is a case in point. Here, as elsewhere in the environmental debate, progressive institutional forces (ecological modernizers) would gain from supplementing their typically “cold” technical style (eg., eco-labeling standards) with a more direct confrontation of the core ecological contradictions of the capitalist system. This, in turn, would undoubtedly appeal to the many radicals who are not content with a mere procrastinating rejection of modernity and the market. Through a focus on their common ground, the two camps could indeed constitute a powerful political force that is able to push realistic, but sweeping, policy proposals embracing the different time and space scales of the environmental crisis. Through such a holistic approach, one could finally see much-needed links made between diverse categories of environmental problems, such as “human ecology” issues (food consumption, pollution, nutrition), “environmental economics” issues (advertising and packaging regulation, taxation regimes), social and regional issues (employment conditions, local and regional urbanism schemes), and global environmental threats (climate change, transboundary pollution, world poverty). Without a doubt, such a “quality of life” outlook would also help this discursive coalition to reconcile a large portion of the public with the cause of sustainable consumption.

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